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ABSTRACT

There are several sides to the debate between adult basic education administrators and teachers concerning the practice of defining literacy by, and dividing adult education programs into, grade levels. Some believe that grade levels are irrelevant or demeaning to typical adult job requirements. Others believe that numerical scores derived by assessing an adult's ability to use or comprehend language or math are also meaningless. The concept of "grade level" is well understood, although specific grade-level requirements are not known. In Tennessee, grade-level proficiency means the grade-specific published objectives for learning skill proficiency. Grade-level proficiency refers to reading, writing, math, oral communication, and group-process skills. During 1989 and 1990, in-depth basic skills' audits were performed for three high-technology industries, and workplace literacy programs were established. Specific grade levels in which each proficiency and related skill is expected to be attained were determined. (Tennessee's specific reading and math proficiency skills related to grade level for adults are described.) (NLA)

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WHAT DOES "GRADE LEVEL" MEAN?

by

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For at least the last decade much debate has occurred within the ranks of adult basic education administrators and teachers concerning the practice of defining literacy by grade levels and dividing adult basic education programs into grade levels. There are several sides to the debate. One dominant side is expressed by those who believe that grade levels are irrelevant to typical adult job requirements, life styles, coping-skill needs, etc., and it is suggested that assigning a grade level to an adult's placement assessment score is not only demeaning but almost meaningless. The comment usually goes something like this: "A thirty year old man reading at the fourth grade level is not a fourth grader!"

Another dominant side is expressed by those who believe that numerical scores such as a CASAS or NAEP score are also meaningless, especially to the lay citizen and perhaps more importantly, the typical state legislator. Scores derived by assessing an adult's ability to use and comprehend language or math within a specific context are interesting, but such assessment strategies are inherently limited, given the unique breadth of context and experience each adult lives within and acquires. Moreover, since such scores are rarely understood, the answer to the question "what does a 150 mean?" generally is "less than a fourth grade level." That's the answer, especially when the question is posed under circumstances when little explanation time is available, such as a T.V. interview or a legislative hearing.

As I visit with legislators, program personnel, literacy groups, and policy developers within our state and other states, I find the concept of "grade level" to be well understood, though few, if any, can specifically describe what fourth-grade proficiency means as it relates to reading or math ability. Neither I nor any of my staff ever encounters an individual who equates a fourth grade assessment level with fourth graders, or a sixth-grade assessment level with sixth graders, etc. Grade level proficiency, as it is defined in Tennessee, means the learning skill proficiency expected of individuals who have mastered the grade-specific published objectives of our state's approved curriculum frameworks for the public schools. For our adult students, grade-level proficiency refers exclusively to reading, writing, and math proficiency expectations found in our curriculum frameworks, but it also includes oral communication and group-process skills required in our industries and only obliquely expected as outcomes for public school students.

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During 1989 and 1990, our state division of Adult and Community Education performed in-depth basic skills' audits for three large industries in Tennessee, all of them so-called high-tech industries with rapidly increasing employee training requirements. Our division also established approximately twenty on-site workplace literacy programs in other similar industries and nearly seventy additional on-site one-and two-class literacy and GED preparation programs in some of Tennessee's smaller industries. As we were performing the skills' audits and working with the other industries, we looked at the reading, writing, and math skill proficiency ranges employees needed in these industries to perform their job tasks adequately, i.e., free of error and with specific time limitations. We also noted whether oral communication and group-process skills were needed.

As we discovered the required proficiencies and related skills, we looked within our curriculum frameworks to determine the specific grade level in which each proficiency and related skill is expected to be attained. Thus, if addition, subtraction, and multiplication of multi-digit numbers is required by employees within a specific industrial job category, third-grade math proficiency is the minimal math ability needed within that job category. If on-the-job solutions of algebraic equations are required, then employees will need tenth grade math proficiency in order to perform adequately.

Though there is no mandated national curriculum for public schools, curricula and grade-level objectives for reading, writing, and math have remarkable similarity from state to state. It is very likely that our Tennessee experience and the adult grade-level proficiency definitions which we have developed will be useful to other state adult education practitioners.

Following are the definitions we use. They are very helpful to us because we can quickly explain grade level should we be asked, and we can send the information out from our office upon request and not have to include lengthy explanations. I hope they are helpful to others:

TENNESSEE'S SPECIFIC READING AND MATH
PROFICIENCY SKILLS RELATED TO GRADE LEVEL FOR ADULTS

GRADE LEVEL	SKILLS
0:	Little or no recognition of alphabet or numbers; cannot recognize name in print.
One:	Knows alphabet; can read and print letters of first and last name; can read the names of numbers from one to one hundred. Can count to one hundred by 1's, 5's, and 10's; can add and substract all single-digit numbers.
Two:	Can "sound out" and read all one-syllable words and 60% of all two-syllable words on standardized word lists; can legibly print full name, address, and telephone number; can alphabetize words. Can add a column of up to four, two-digit numbers; can substract two-digit numbers; can identify simple fractions.
Three:	Can read 90% of all words on "most frequently used" word lists; can read all print and cursive writing of no more than two-syllable words and 60% of print and cursive writing using three-syllable words; can legibly write letters or messages to others, using simple and compound sentences; can demonstrate proper use of a period, comma, and question mark. Can add columns of up to two three-digit numbers; can substract all three-digit numbers; can demonstrate knowledge of multiplication tables, using numbers through the 12's.

Four:

Can "sound out" and read 90% of all two-and three-syllable words in both print and cursive writing; can write single-paragraph directions, using simple and compound sentences.

Can add, subtract, multiply and divide all three-digit number problems with 90% accuracy; can identify and use basic mathematical symbols.

Five:

Can read both print and cursive writing containing three-syllable words in all types of sentence structures; can paraphrase with 90% accuracy all simple and compound sentences found within single or linking paragraphs; can write unified paragraphs containing simple and compound sentences, using print or cursive writing styles; can spell with 90% accuracy all personal-choice words used in developing a narrative.

Can perform with 90% accuracy all addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division operations using whole numbers with 90% accuracy. Can measure to the nearest 32nd of an inch.

Six:

Can accurately paraphrase written narratives containing words of up to four syllables within random combinations of simple, compound, and complex sentences.

Can accurately interpret actions required in specific written instructions; can compose and legibly write in cursive style sequential instructions such as providing directions from a specific location to a specific address.

Can achieve 90% accuracy when solving math problems requiring use of normal math operations; can determine correct selection of math operations and perform the required math operations when solving narrative types of math problems.

Seven:	Can accurately paraphrase three-to five-paragraph narratives containing poly-syllabic words within all types of sentence structures, including compound complex sentences; can compose and legibly write in cursive style 100-word descriptive paragraphs using combinations of all major sentence types. Can perform with 100% accuracy all four basic math operations; can convert fractions to decimals and decimals to fractions; can add, subtract, multiply, and divide simple fractions.
Eight:	Can analyze a descriptive paragraph and, with 100% accuracy, determine whether there are spelling and punctuation errors. Can compose and legibly write in cursive style 100-word cause and effect and comparison and contrast paragraphs with 100% accuracy in punctuation and spelling. Can solve narrative math problems requiring use of fractions and decimals.
Nine:	Can analyze all samples of expository writing and determine with 80% accuracy whether there are spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors; can compose and legibly write in cursive style three-paragraph pursuasive essays free of punctuation, spelling, and grammatical errors. Can find and summarize, both orally and through written narrative, information from normal library reference materials. Can perform with 100% accuracy all math operations using whole numbers, fractions, and decimals.

Ten:

Can listen to oral instructions and orally paraphrase the directions given with 100% accuracy; can write a 100% accurate synthesis of oral instructions; can use periodicals and other non-technical journals to develop information about any given topic. Can work productively and cooperatively with others in collaborative problem-solving tasks.

Can interpret and solve algebraic equations with 70% accuracy; can interpret tables and graphs; can develop tables and graphs to illustrate various methods of presenting data.

Eleven:

Can comprehend and use information from literacy works, primary source material, and professional journals to compose and legibly write multi-paragraph 500-word essays concerning historical or contemporary social, economic, and political issues of national and international concern; can work productively and cooperatively in groups of no fewer than seven individuals in mutual problem solving tasks; can synthesize a group decision making process in both oral and written presentations to peers and supervisors.

Can make mathematical estimates of time and space; can apply principles of geometry to determine properties and measurement of angles, lines, points, solids, and surfaces with 80% accuracy.

Twelve:

Can comprehend and synthesize, both orally and in written narrative, information found in technical publications written for general public use; can work cooperatively and productively in both small and large groups in mutual problem solving tasks, and can serve as recorder, facilitator, and reporter for such groups.

Can apply trigonometric functions in determining relations and measurements of sides and angles of triangles; can interpret technical data and read drawings and blueprints.